

History Proves Skiers Will Ski on Anything—Especially Sand

Lack of snow doesn't slow true believers.

BY JEFF BLUMENFELD



For decades, the lack of snow hasn't prevented skiers from sliding down an incline. Modern sand skiing dates to a 1927 French military expedition in the Sahara. Here, German sand-skiing speed record holder (nearly 60 mph) Henrik May shows his form on the sands of Namibia.

Snow is unquestionably top of the heap for sliding. Not to get all Poindexter on you, but skis slide easily thanks to a very thin layer of meltwater between the skis and the snow.

So what happens if it doesn't snow? Or what if it's one of those three warmer seasons that shall remain nameless? That's where history has proven skiers will ski on

just about anything, especially sand. For decades, the mecca for sand skiing in the U.S. has been the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve near Alamosa, Colorado, North America's tallest dunes. Opened in 1932 as a national monument, it became a national park in 2004.

Each fall, ski bums return to Great Sand Dunes to ski or board 34-degree, 742-foot-high dunes in a tradition that, for many, begins

the new ski season. One enthusiast tells OutThereColorado.com, "Sand is not as slippery as snow, so it's like skiing in slow motion. You have to make shallow turns, but it's definitely real skiing. That's why we come back every year—because we're jonesin' to ski."

The Great Dunes skier was accurate, if not precise, about the relative slickness of sand vs. snow. To get technical (stay with me here):



Above: The 1980 Epoke Beach Classic, in Redondo Beach, California, attracted media, including NBC and the *National Enquirer*, which trumpeted "sand skiing was sweeping the country." Right: Charles Pierpont, of the Cape Cod Sand & Pine Needle Ski School, flashes a wedge turn deep in the dunes of Cape Cod in 1937.



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dry sand has a dynamic coefficient of friction of about .55 compared to snow at about .03—depending on the snow and the ski wax. So sand is about 18 times more resistant to gliding than snow. But if you dampen the sand a bit (just a bit) the coefficient can go down to a range of .3 to .45, depending on the size of the sand grains and how wet the conditions are. Ancient pyramid-builders poured water on desert sand to more easily drag massive sleds. And that's why savvy sand skiers hit the Great Dunes slopes after a rain.

At the Great Dunes, sandboards can be rented outside the park and are more popular than skis. It seems that while sand doesn't appear to damage the base of alpine skis, it may dull edges and jam bindings. Sandboard bases, much harder than snowboard bases, are usually treated with paraffin-based wax to reduce friction, and it works like a charm on rain-soaked sand.

Sand skiing in the Colorado desert is not without risk. Great Dunes sand can reach 150 degrees F., lightning can occur at any time during the warmer months, and in high winds, those Covid masks come in handy. Eye protection, long sleeves and pants are helpful to avoid getting sandblasted.

Still, sand is better than other sliding surfaces known to lure skiers. Members of the Facebook group

Elite Skiing report sliding on volcanic ash, pine needles, scree (loose stones), shale, coal slag, carpet, soap flakes, powdered mica, and even gravel and barite mixed with used motor oil. During the heyday of the New York State Borscht Belt in the Catskills, Grossinger's resort hotel experimented with ground-up collar buttons (see *Skiing History*, May-June 2020).

For millions of snow-starved Europeans, there's one word: plastics. So-called dry slopes are part of a cottage industry tracked by *Dry Slope News*, established in 2018. "People have been skiing on slopes without snow for over a century, but the earliest artificial surfaces manufactured especially for skiing date from the 1950s," says editor Patrick Thorne.

"Since the first few dry slopes appeared, close to 2,000 have been built in more than 50 countries worldwide. At the height of dry skiing's popularity in the early 1980s, there were reports of over 300 in Great Britain alone."

Sand Skiing Gets its Start in Africa

Some 44 countries offer sandboarding today according to Sandboard.com.

Modern sand skiing dates back to 1927 when French athlete, mountaineer, aviator, and journalist Marie Marvingt (1875-1963) combined her

careers as a surgical nurse and military aviator, to create aluminum skis for an experimental medevac airplane to land on Saharan sand in Morocco and Algeria (see *Skiing History*, March-April 2020).

By then a decorated hero of World War I and credited as the world's first female combat pilot, Marvingt hired a metal shop in her home town of Nancy to forge personal skis from solid aircraft-grade aluminum alloy. She determined metal sand skis were better than wood and certainly better than walking up dunes in sandals, reportedly testing them on sand for 50 miles. One year later, she started a ski school for Berbers, along the snowless Moroccan coast.

Marvingt's legacy continues in the northern African country. Today, people who engage in guided ski touring on the snows of Mount Toubkal or take advantage of the lift service at Oukaimeden in the rugged High Atlas Mountains in southwestern Morocco, also head a few hours southeast to the edge of the Sahara Desert to sand ski or sandboard for bragging rights.

Four thousand miles farther south, in Namibia, the German-born Henrik May, 45, has been pioneering the sport of sand skiing for two decades, according to *Powder* magazine (July 2013). There, the Namib Desert is home to some of the largest dunes in the world, thousands of

miles from the nearest snow.

May's company, Ski Namibia (ski-namibia.com), is one of the very few dune ski-specific operations in the world and has been featured by NBC's *Today Show* and the CBS reality show, *The Amazing Race*. He started his touring company in 2003 and since then has logged thousands of ski descents. He set a Guinness world speed record in 2010, reaching 92.12 km/h (57.24 mph) on sand. He introduced *Wustenskisport*, or dune skiing, to the internet with guided runs usually between 200 to 400 vertical feet after climbs of around 20 minutes.

Back in the U.S.A.

Sand skiing in the United States dates back at least to 1937 on the Cape Cod, Massachusetts, side of Nantucket Sound. According to the *New York Times* (Sept. 12, 1937), "Some of the dunes near Centerville are unusually long, permitting runs of 100 and 150 feet, on which a skier can attain speeds of about forty miles an hour. . . . Wooden skis slide easily on the sand and gain speed, particularly when the sand is covered by short grass or pine needles."

At any rate, those Centerville dunes are long gone, according to Patti Machado, town of Barnstable Director of Recreation in Hyannis,

Massachusetts. "We do not have any dunes. I think that the beach topography may have been different back then," she emails *Skiing History*.

One famed sand skiing competition was *Sandblast* in Prince George, British Columbia, held every August from 1971 to 2003. It attracted thousands of spectators to a dual slalom race among so-called "sand-blasters" who didn't want summer to get in the way of their favorite sport. Just north of the city by the Nechako River is a steep hill called the Cutbanks where 10 to 15-sec. races were once held on a 500-foot slope of sand and gravel. It was popular over the decades and people traveled long distances to participate, including filmmaker Warren Miller, according to FreeThought-Blogs.com.

Amazingly, no one was ever seriously injured. But according to the TV show *BC Was Awesome*, hosted by Bob Kronbauer, in 2003 some yahoos descended in a three-wheeled couch. The resulting crash scared off the insurance companies, leading to a permanent ban.

Sand and Deliver

Sand skiing was also popular as a cross-country competition on Pacific Ocean beaches during that era. In 1980, Bjorn Arvnes of Norway, winner of the 1977 American Birke-

beiner, won the sand XC skiing title at the Epoke Beach Classic at Redondo Beach, California. Event producers were Larry Harrison, a rep for NorTur, the U.S. importer of Epoke Skis, and Peter Graves, NorTur marketing director.

The sand skiing stunt appeared on NBC's *Real People*, page one of the *Los Angeles Times*, and even in the *National Enquirer*, which wrote breathlessly that "sand skiing was sweeping the country." Tom Kelly, who handled event promotion with Graves, tells *Skiing History*, "It was a hugely successful media event for the time, garnering national coverage for Epoke."

Other favorite North American sand skiing locations are Jockey's Ridge State Park in North Carolina, White Sands National Park in New Mexico, Idaho's Bruneau Sand Dunes and St. Anthony Sand Dunes, California's San Bernardino Mountains, and Sandbanks Provincial Park in Ontario.

In the end, sand has an enduring advantage over snow: It doesn't melt. ❄️

ISHA VP Jeff Blumenfeld's most recent contribution to *Skiing History* was "*The Day They Threw Cow Chips in Las Vegas*" (January-February 2021).



Boasting the tallest dunes in North America, the Great Sand Dunes preserve has been the hub of U.S. sand skiing for decades.



Colorado's Great Sand Dunes was declared a National Monument in 1932, and visitors soon grabbed whatever was at hand to start sliding. Cooking pots turned out to be fast enough that two of these 1940s adventurers needed to brake.